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HOW TO BE HAPPILY MARRIED

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HOW TO BE HAPPILY MARRIED

ARE there more happy marriages or unhappy? I wonder what you would answer from your own experience and from what you know of your circle of friends and relations? Newspapers, films, and modern novels leave us with the impression that most marriages are a tragic mistake; on the other hand, if we examine other evidence, we discover that the opposite is the case. The majority of marriages are successful, but the subject of a happy marriage is naturally more difficult for an author or a journalist to make interesting to his readers. It does not provide either problems or "copy," and therefore we hear little of the successes in marriage and far too much of the tragedies.

THE PART WHICH PERSONALITY PLAYS

Before we study the preparations which help towards making marriage permanent and joyous I want to say at the outset that, unless the right kind of *character* is forthcoming, no *knowledge* in itself can ensure happy married life. It is the personalities of husband and wife that count. Knowledge may smooth over initial difficulties,

but knowledge cannot build up an abiding partnership. Character of a certain quality will surmount any difficult circumstance which may arise, and will weather through rough times to the end. Mere book knowledge or worldly experience cannot do that.

Character is formed in the home, through the early upbringing, through school, through religion. It is not our fault if we have not always had the best of these three influences. But it is our fault if we do not put the best of ourselves, such as we are, into our married life. It will call out from us all our reserves of unselfishness, of courage, of patience and good-humour. It will be upon the mutual understanding and unselfish love of husband and wife that the permanent home will be built and the spiritual union achieved.

THE PART WHICH RELIGION PLAYS

But we can go one step further back than character—to the main source from which character springs. Religion can provide the power and love and laughter which are necessary to a happy home. Jesus Christ can supply the resources of unselfishness and courage and good cheer which make a comradeship between two people real and lasting. It will be found that the happiest marriages are in greater number among those Christians who are sincerely trying to follow their Master.

But, though religion has everything to say to the start and progress of married life, the Church has been very shy of the subject and its teaching. Up to the end of the last century it was not considered correct to speak of such matters before people, still less in the pulpit. Nowadays secrecy and silence have changed into perhaps too great an outspokenness, and sex, marriage, and divorce form the subject-matter of the majority of novels, plays, and films. The Church alone has remained almost silent, partly because sex and marriage are difficult subjects to deal with before a congregation of mixed ages and very different types, partly because it is thought that the parents of young people may object. Another reason for this silence lies in the ever-growing population of parishes and the growing shortage of the clergy—facts which make friendship with and knowledge of his people almost impossible to a busy vicar. He marries couples in church whom he has never seen before, and has no opportunity, except at the service, to speak with them on so intimate a subject.

A Church which blesses marriage must also teach something of its meaning, and it is hoped that through special classes and lectures, through talks and interviews when the banns go up (or preferably before) more opportunities may be created for young men and women to seek the advice and experience of the clergy and others who can help them in their questions and diffi-

culties. Never hesitate to go to your clergyman, or to any other good and wise friend if you are in any perplexity. It is unwise to put your trust in pamphlets, chemists, advertisements, or what other people in office or in work can tell you. Choose someone you can trust, someone who has experience both of life and of God; and lay your problem before such a one, be it man or woman, clergyman, doctor, or family friend.

THE CHOICE OF A PARTNER

The choice of a partner is one of the most important steps which we can take in life. Our work and our home will affect not only our own happiness and character, but the happiness and characters of those who are about us, and of those who will come after us. We need to pause before taking such a step, and ask ourselves one or two questions.

1. First of all, what is "falling in love"? What makes us so much more attracted to some people than to others? Why is it that we experience a certain thrill at meeting a particular someone of the opposite sex, or even at the thought of it? Do we only experience that emotional excitement in connection with one person, or with several people at different times? Is this attraction heightened by physical nearness, by excitement such as dancing, or is there something deeper in it which appreciates the real character? Are we ever attracted towards some-

one whom in our heart of hearts we do not respect? Nature alone is never a reliable guide, and sex attraction, although often the first step towards the choice of a partner, on the other hand may be but a passing feeling or a magnetism that is physical. A permanent and happy marriage cannot be built on such shifting ground as emotional feeling. We need something else besides if we are to choose our partner rightly.

2. Secondly, we have to consider what *marriage* really means. In the Prayer Book service the third reason for marriage is the one to be considered first—"it was ordained for the mutual society, help and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity." We must remember that of all the relationships between men and women throughout the centuries, monogamy has been accounted the most successful. Experiments in free love as nowadays in Russia, in trial marriage as in America, in polygamy as in India and Africa, can never supply the same sense of security and harmony as a faithful partnership of one man and one woman throughout life. Therefore, since the partnership is to be carried on "till death us do part," the choice of the right man or woman must be based on the anticipation of the future and its claims.

In marriage there will not only be romance—and, thank God, romance can last all through middle age, and old men and old women can still

remain lovers—but there will be ups and downs, differences in outlook, differences in wishes and wants, hard work and responsibilities for both. Marriage is an adventure, and, like all adventures, has its hardships as well as its delights. It is difficult for explorers to live together at close quarters for months at a time; it is difficult for married people, unless they continue to love each other dearly and to consider each other continually, to avoid sometimes “getting on each other’s nerves.” As the small boy once answered, “In Christian marriage you are only allowed to have one wife: that is why it is called monotony!”

A Scotchman once said that the wife he would choose would be one with whom he could gladly spend a month’s holiday of wet weather on a lonely seaside island! That would be a tremendous test for anyone. It is not enough to choose your comrade in life because of good looks or charm of manner, because he or she is a good dancing partner, or because you both like the same amusements. All these reasons help towards a mutual attraction, but besides these you need someone on whom you feel you can lean, someone with whom you feel you can fit in, someone with whose outlook you feel you can agree, and someone with whom you can laugh over the same things.

Married love sometimes has its beginning in sex attraction, sometimes in the sharing of

common interests; in the end it will be a blending of both, and a daily “growing into one another.”

PREPARATIONS FOR MARRIAGE

1. Sex Instruction.—Psychologists tell us that our early teaching on this subject makes a great deal of difference to our outlook upon sex and marriage in later life. Many people, unfortunately, in early childhood and adolescence have obtained their information upon sex matters from unreliable or unclean sources, or have had some twist due to their home environment, and consequently approach the physical union of marriage with some degree of nervousness or of repugnance. It is essential that young people should learn these facts of life from truthful and wise sources, whether it be from their parents, school teachers, or clergy. There is no excuse nowadays for negligence in this respect owing to the number of good and sensible books which are published on this subject. If you feel you do not possess the requisite knowledge on the facts of marriage and of birth, you should ask a doctor or a clergyman or some wise friend to recommend you such a book. Books vary so much that it is wiser to read one that is well recommended.

As Lord Dawson of Penn says, “If the act of union is given to us by God, it seems that it is our duty to know how to use it.” Knowledge

of our own bodies and of the bodies and temperaments of the other sex is a necessary equipment for the first steps in married life.

2. *Health*.—A second precaution, which is advisable in the interests of both parties, as well as of the children-to-be, is to consult a family doctor, so as to be sure of a clean bill of health and that nothing stands in the way of exercising the power of reproduction. This common-sense precaution may save endless trouble and difficulty in times to come. There may be some small obstacle or hindrance, and a very little treatment may set things right.

3. *The Time of Courtship*.—The length of the courtship will vary according to the circumstances. It is a matter for each individual couple to decide, and a difficult problem for young couples who are not well off. Should they marry on an income which barely supported the man when single, or should they consent to undergo the strain of a long engagement? The facts in the light of the future should be frankly discussed, so that both, when the time comes, will marry with full acceptance of what lies before them. If they agree to marry on a small income, this may prove the most severe test of their married life in the first few years. The anxiety of making ends meet, the cramped accommodation of rooms or flat, the necessity even of sharing the house of some relative, the inability to entertain or to have pleasant holidays

or jaunts, is apt to try the tempers and test the loyalties of the young couple, and not all can stand the test. If the additional expense of babies, and the wear and tear of their early years without domestic help in the home, have to be met as well, the newly born love between husband and wife often snaps under the strain of household cares and worry. Only the strong faith and endurance and gaiety of the Christian life can weather through the early troubles of a home which is based upon an exiguous income.

On the other hand, there are those couples who, like Pierrot and Pierrette, can be gloriously happy with "love in a cottage," can live light-heartedly on Welsh rabbit and sardines, and furnish their rooms delightfully out of packing-cases. These make all life a song, and live out the Gospel teaching: "Be not over-anxious what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink: nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment?"

But you must sit down and count the cost. You, as a woman, must know before you marry whether you can carry through with gladness the lot of a poor man's wife; you, as a man, must face the financial responsibility, and decide whether you can make an income for one go as far for two, or even more. Otherwise there must be a period of waiting until the position is improved, and in that case both parties must

decide to make the best possible use of an engagement which may last many years. It may mean strain and tension, especially for the man, and if the couple are living in the same neighbourhood and able to see much of each other, it would be better, in the event of a long engagement, for both to take up some other interest in the period of waiting, so that the intensity of the engagement may be softened and the time used to good purpose. Again, only a Christian outlook and a wide interest in human affairs beyond our own little circle can redeem us from a sense of irritability, or help us to overcome the strong passions of sex.

Just one suggestion more—the woman can hasten the marriage appreciably by refusing to encourage her fiancé in his expenditure upon her, and by urging him to save up the money which might otherwise be spent on extravagant presents or outings. A great deal of fun can be extracted from “sprees” which are cheap!

4. *The Question of Children.*—In some cases, especially in America, many have found themselves unable to stand the strain of a long engagement, and, where the woman is already earning her living, have married on the understanding that the wife carries on her livelihood. There is much to be said for this in the face of a weary wait as an alternative, but the question of a family must then be considered beforehand by the engaged couple. The working woman can

often avail herself of a handy crèche to leave her baby in for the day; the professional woman has more difficulty in securing a capable nurse at a sum she can afford. If the desire for children is fulfilled, it must be remembered that no one, whether neighbour, nurse, or institution, however well equipped, can ever make up altogether for the lack of the personal relationship between mother and child. As soon as financial necessity is relieved, the claim of the children takes precedence over a woman's profession or her wish for extra pocket-money.

From the Christian standpoint, marriage is not complete without the intention of having children. When couples decide to remain childless—perhaps through financial difficulties, perhaps through the natural wish of the woman to continue her profession—there must surely remain some sense of incompleteness and imperfection. Such marriages must fall short of the Christian ideal. Even though the children may not be desired at first either by the woman or the man, with most people there comes a time when they are glad of them, and would not have it otherwise. The maternal instinct is not evident in every woman at the start, but often it emerges and develops with the birth of a child. The man is often over-anxious about the expense of education and the housing accommodation, and unfortunately these obstacles are enough to deter many parents nowadays from having as large a

family as they would like. But once more comes in the Christian faith. "Be not *over-anxious*." The contribution which children make to a marriage is well worth the price to be paid for them. As to the wife's profession, it has been proved over and over again that a woman can both bring up her children well and carry on her own interests to a very large extent.

5. *The Wedding and the Honeymoon*.—If you are to be married in Church, remember that it is a service, and that you are meeting together there to ask God's blessing upon you in this new chapter of your life. Some people make the wedding such an occasion for display that they forget altogether that it is a service of prayer and dedication. If you are a communicant, you will find the service of Holy Communion for your two selves after the ceremony deepens the sense of spiritual union and consecration to each other and to God. Some people very wisely arrange for the reception of their friends and the display of presents a few days before the wedding, so that they can enjoy the service quietly, and afterwards meet the intimacy of their own family circle without sense of strain or over-excitement. In that way the newly married pair start off on their honeymoon without being over-fatigued by the pressure of the day. Being married is all very exciting, and the preparations often detailed and exhausting. It is good to spend the first few days of the honeymoon in quiet enjoyment of each other.

THE HOME

To speak about married life in the home would take another whole pamphlet as long as this one. I can only say that at first, as always, there must be "give and take," an eye alert for change of moods, a period for adjustments. A sympathetic wife will try to understand her husband's work and interests, will welcome her husband's friends, even if they are not always her "sort"; a sympathetic husband will listen to domestic details, and when required lend a helping hand with household chores. *Both* father and mother must co-operate in the training of the children: one cannot take the place of the other.

A happy marriage, based upon the Christian view of life, and imbued with Christ's own spirit, is the most wonderfully glorious of all human relationships. Always there is the sense of someone to share the fun, to share the work, to whom one can talk unrestrainedly, for whom one can save the "titbits" of the day, with whom, as comrade, one can go through life, loving and loved, to bring in the "abiding city, whose Maker and Builder is God."